

Tape #5 - Side A

\*Only half of Side A recorded

Dr. M. E. DeBakey

Interviewed by Don Schanche

Pierre Hotel, N. Y.

SCHANCHE: Testing, one, two, three, four...

DR. DeBAKEY: Now what is the schedule here? I've got ten minutes to ten.

SCHANCHE: Right. She's going to call us as soon as he comes in.

DR. DeBAKEY: Oh, alright.

SCHANCHE: And if he's in early enough, why we'll go....  
We left you in Washington, D.C., just sort of learning your ropes in government and Army medicine.

DR. DeBAKEY: Well, yeah. Well you see my first assignment when I got there was in the surgical consultant's division of the Surgeon General's office. And I had a multiple..I was given multiple assignments. For one thing, I became the sort of the chief editor. And while I wasn't given that title all of the papers submitted by the armed forces were channeled for publication in the Army Journal were channeled to me.

SCHANCHE: Is that called the Army Medical Journal?

DR. DeBAKEY: Yeah, the Army Medical Journal, I think it is. And I had to either farm these out to experts in the field-- If a paper came in on preventive medicine I would send it to somebody in preventive medicine--one of the consultants in preventive medicine. We had what was called the Consultants Division. These.. So we had a Surgical Consultants Division, a Medical Consultants Division, a Preventive Medicine Consultants Division, and so on.

SCHANKE: It seems to me this did two things for you. One it got you familiar with certain aspects of the government bureacracy. But two it widened your acquaintances in the medical profession.

DR. DeBAKEY: It did. Very much so. Very much so. For example, I got to know some of the top people in psychiatry, in radiology, in medicine, preventive medicine and so on, you see. And became very closely acquainted with them on a first name basis. We were daily in contact.

SCHANKE: Could you name some of them?

DR. DeBAKEY: What I could do there is ultimately give you the names of those who had a certain influence...

DR. DeBAKEY: Now, that was one of my assignments. Well, I had to exercise some editorial judgment as to whether the article was worthy of publication. Sometimes it had to be rewritten. I had to do a lot of the editing on it and whether.. if it was worthy of publication and so on. And more and more that.. I assumed the full responsibility for that as time went by--what was published. So, I almost became a kind of a censor, you see, in addition to editor.

SCHANKE: Kind of a super-editor of the Army Medical Journal.

DR. DeBAKEY: Another one of my jobs was to write speeches for the Surgeon General and for... I became a ghost writer. And I've got .. still have in my files, and I'll get you a copy of these, some of these speeches I wrote in long-hand. You can still see them written in long-hand. In addition to that, I had to get.. become more and more familiar with the structure of the Army in terms of its role to support the various levels of support that was needed in the armed forces. For example, you see, in the United States we had station hospitals and general hospitals and dispensary Stations and so on, you see, at different levels of care. Then we subsequently organized these into specialized

DR. DeBAKEY: centers for vascular surgery, neurosurgery, thoracic surgery and so on. And as time went on I learned more about what it was over-seas and then I made a trip over-seas. And I was assigned as a consultant to each one of the Armies in Europe. I had a wonderful experience there. For example, when I was in the First Army, while I was in the headquarters of the First Army, they received word about the Remangen Bridge hit. The Remangen Bridge being captured, you know. It was kind of a fluke when they captured the Remangen Bridge.

SCHANKE: My brother was the first one who crossed the river and captured a prisoner and swam him back and got a Silver Star.

DR. DeBAKEY: Is that right? Well, shortly after they captured it, I was in the headquarters. Shortly after they captured it, we got the message. The surgeon said to me, " Would you like to go over and see it?" And I said, "Yes, sir, I would." When I got there, the Germans were still firing to try and destroy the bridge. And the engineers had put up a pontoon bridge across. And they were sending personnel and Army vehicles and so on across this pontoon bridge. And I went

DR. DeBAKEY: over in a jeep on this pontoon bridge. They were doing it in specified intervals, not on a regular basis, but on an irregular basis. Because the Germans were still trying to zero in to destroy the bridge.

SCHANKE: Sort of random runs across the..

DR. DeBAKEY: Yeah. And I got over there and found a German hospital that they'd captured filled with German soldiers who were injured. Most of whom, a large number of whom, had amputations--were amputees. That's why they couldn't remove them. And they had infections and it was a sight to behold. A very poorly treated group of prisoners, I mean, of well, prisoners of ours, of course. Largely because they didn't have penicillin. They were unable to control infection like we could. On another occasion..

SCHANKE: Was their field hospital a crude...there...or was it comparable to..

DR. DeBAKEY: Well, actually, it was a hospital that they had taken over, a civilian hospital building, permanent building that they had taken over. And used as a military hospital. Some of the German doctors were still there and the nurses and so on. They left them there to take care of the patients. I guess

DR. DeBAKEY: they were glad to be left too.

SCHANCHE: Did you immediately press them into service to continue...

DR. DeBAKEY: Oh, yes, they stayed there. On another.. When I was in the Third Army I stayed with Patton. I had a wonderful visit with him. For seven days I lived as part of his family. He had an aide and then he had his chief of staff who lived with him and his aide. And then his chief surgeon who lived with him was a very close friend of mine, in fact, we were classmates.

SCHANCHE: What was his name?

DR. DeBAKEY: Odom. Charlie Odom. And of course when I got to the Third Army, Charlie insisted that I come and stay with them. That's how I stayed with Patton. And every night at dinner he laid out a beautiful table--with silverware, china, you know, tablecloths, linen..

SCHANCHE: He believed there was no reason not to live like a gentleman even there.

DR. DeBAKEY: That's right. That's right.

SCHANCHE: Did he live in a van?

DR. DeBAKEY: No, well, when I was there he lived in this castle. They had requisitioned this castle. That's where we were

DR. DeBAKEY:       staying. Lovely old castle. And really was very nice, because, you know, he was comfortable in this place.

SCHANCHE:         Where was it located?

DR. DeBAKEY:       I've forgotten the name of the town now in Germany. I have it in my files some place.

SCHANCHE:         Southwestern Germany?

DR. DeBAKEY:       Yeah. But he was really quite a character. And I must say that my stay there changed my opinion of him, because before you thought of him as a flamboyant soldier, but actually he was a scholarly soldier.

SCHANCHE:         Do you have any anecdotal story about your stay that you can remember?

DR. DeBAKEY:       Yeah. One.. Well, he would after the dinner we'd sit around the fireplace. It was in the winter. We'd sit around the fireplace and have an after-dinner drink and..

SCHANCHE:         Was it a huge wood-burning fireplace.

DR. DeBAKEY:       Yeah, that's right. Lovely. And he would then tell us... He loved to tell historical stories about previous campaigns. And he would point out why battles took place..you know,

DR. DeBAKEY: critical battles took place where they took place, repeatedly over the centuries. It was because of the natural geography. And they were either critical to the defense of a place or critical to an invading army's progress. And he told about these, you see. And all the battles in Italy, for example, and the south of France, going and moving into Germany. He would tell us where these critical points were previously. You know, he knew his history beautifully--military history. And he was really a military scholar. And when he sat there talking like that he talked like a professor.

SCHANKE: He had a high, squeaky voice, didn't he?

DR. DeBAKEY: Yeah, he talked in a high voice. That's right. But you almost forgot the voice as you were listening to him tell about these things because he did it in a way that was fascinating and most interesting. And none of the flamboyant aspect of him appeared there. This was a kind of a scholar.

SCHANKE: A scholar.

DR. DeBAKEY: Of a scholar, yes. And.. But on one evening one of the other aspects of his character showed up clearly. We



DR. DeBAKEY: were sitting at dinner and the cook, his regular cook who knew how he wanted his meat prepared--He was very particular about it--had taken sick and a new cook was brought in to take his place. And... (Interrupted by phone ringing.)

... Well, his, I think it was his niece was in one of the voluntary services and was visiting with us that evening. She was the only lady there. Charming girl.

SCHANKE: Pretty and young?

DR. DeBAKEY: Yes. Attractive. I think she was married though, I'm not sure, but anyway she was a volunteer, whether she was with the Red Cross or what agency, anyway.. And she was there for that evening. Well, we were sitting around the table, this group of five or six or seven of us when the waiter, who was a soldier, brought the tray on which the roast beef was on to show him. And he looked at this thing and gosh he got mad and flared up and started cursing the soldier and cursing whoever it was and wondered "what in the hell happened to it. The cook knows better than this." He called him by name. I've forgotten his name.

SCHANKE: Can you recall any of his exact words?

DR. DeBAKEY: Oh, he was "goddamning" everything, you know. And I was shocked, you see. There was this lady sitting there and obviously she had heard him before, you know. And it didn't make any difference to him if she was there because she didn't seem to mind a great deal. And this poor soldier, you know, he was so frightened his knees were shaking. And finally, one of ... I guess it was his aides said, "General, I'm sorry that you didn't know this, but the cook, your regular cook was taken sick and there's a new cook there." "Well, goddamn it, why didn't he find out how I wanted this done, " you know, "Take it back..." He was mad as hell. And we all sat in stunned silence. There wasn't anything we could do. Finally, the boy brought back something else. I've forgotten what it was. We sat there and ate, but the dinner had been ruined. There wasn't much to say. He said a few words a little later on and then it wasn't long after that we went back and sat down like we usually did by the fireplace. He took us.. He had a cigar and we were sitting around and pretty soon he mellowed again as though nothing had happened. It was

SCHANKE: That's an example of the mercurial character of a person.

DR. DeBAKEY: Yeah. Right there. Just like that, you see.

SCHANKE: You don't remember what they brought on the second round do you. Was it a prepared food? Was it ham or something?

DR. DeBAKEY: Yeah. Something else. Yeah. Something else, but I don't remember...

SCHANKE: It was something very ordinary.

DR. DeBAKEY: Yeah, but I don't remember what it was. But the dinner had been sort of ruined, you see. For the rest of us anyway. And even he was just as mad as he could be. Well another incident happened when I was there which was interesting, because I stayed about a week, you see. Well, I was getting ready to go to the next Army, which I think was the Ninth Army. I don't know whether it was... Let's see, there was the First, the Third. His was the Third. And then there was the Ninth and the Seventh. I think, I'd have to check this, but it was..I think it was the Ninth, though I'm not sure, that I was getting ready to move to. And I had been down to the First. Well, when I was

DR. DeBAKEY: down there, the surgeon, chief surgeon for that Army used his medical personnel in such a way that he kept more than half of his personnel on reserve. You see, always. So that they were doing nothing half the time. And this seemed to me to be a very inefficient way to use personnel.

SCHANKE: What was his reasoning for this?

DR. DeBAKEY: Well, his reasoning was that he wanted a large reserve in case he was hit with a large number of wounded, he wanted to be prepared. Well, the trouble was with that was that when he was hit with a large number of wounded then he didn't have enough personnel on the field and the soldiers weren't getting the best treatment because there were such great delays. Some soldiers were sitting there for as much as twelve hours waiting to be treated.

SCHANKE: The medical people couldn't get at them.

DR. DeBAKEY: Couldn't get to them in time, because there wasn't enough people there to take care of them. So I made some personal remarks about this, pointing out that this to me seemed to be a waste. And the consultant in surgery shared my views.

DR. DeBAKEY: He was pointing all this out to me. He was distressed by all this. But he couldn't do anything because the Commander wouldn't let him do what he wanted to do. So, I said something about it and indicated that I had been down to the Fifth Army in Italy and said, "Just look how they did it in the Fifth Army where they have far more casualties." And made the comparisons. Well, then this Commander had gotten, subsequently gotten word because the consultant who was trying to get him to change said, "DeBakey made these remarks. " And said, "We ought to change."

SCHANKE: The consultant was a civilian surgeon?

DR. DeBAKEY: Yeah, previous civilian surgeon.

SCHANKE: He was traveling with you or..?

DR. DeBAKEY: No, no. He was permanently assigned as consultant to that Army. So.. He was from Memphis, Tennessee, I remember. So.. I think his name was Gus Crissler. So apparently he got mad as hell about these critical remarks that I had made. Sent word up to Headquarters in Paris about it and threatened to court martial me on the basis

DR. DeBAKEY: that the remarks I made were aid and comfort to the enemy if it got out, or something like that. Bad for the morale of his troops. So, I didn't know about this until I got this urgent call from Paris.

SCHANKE: Now this would be the medical officer in charge of that Army?

DR. DeBAKEY: No. The Headquarters in Paris was the medical headquarters for the whole of the European theater.

SCHANKE: Right. The one who wanted you court martialed is the medical chief, not ..

DR. DeBAKEY: The head was what was called the chief surgeon of the Army. He was a regular army man. So, I got the call and Patton loaned me his private little plane to fly me back to Paris. It was only a little grasshopper planes. You know, single motor planes. Well, I had heard rumors.. you know, stories about some of these planes being shot down by the Germans. And on our way over to Paris from the front, we were flying at fairly low levels. We were flying about 2000 feet, 2500 feet. Well, all of a sudden the pilot in front of me--I was sitting behind the pilot in this

DR. DeBAKEY: two-seater plane. The pilot above me motioned me to look back. And I looked back and I could see way in the distance a plane coming at us. And he couldn't tell whether it was one of our planes or not, so he started down. That's what they do in these things. They go down and get closer to the ground and sort of zig-zag. And I could just see the plane..the German plane shooting me right in the back. I guess it's about the scarest I've ever been. Well, pretty soon we saw this plane come and pass us up to one side above us and wag his wings. It was an American plane. And God what a sigh of relief. But anyway, I finally got to Paris and then I went to Headquarters. The chief surgical consultant for the European theater was a man by the name of Elliott, who was professor of surgery at Boston and Harvard. And a good friend of mine. A fine man. And he said, when I came in, he said, "Mike, what happened in the Ninth Army?" And I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, we've got a request to consider court martially you for making some very critical remarks about it." And I said, "Well, all I said..all I pointed out

DR. DeBAKEY: was the fact was that he was using his personnel rather inefficiently compared to the use elsewhere." And I pointed out for him how they use the personnel. And I said, "As you know, I'm very interested in the use of personnel." And I was collecting data on how personnel was used for an article I was writing with a man by the name of Gilbert Beebe -- the man who works on the National Research Council. He was a statistician as well. And we wanted to develop a ratio of how .. different kind of personnel for perspective...later we wrote a book on medical logistics. And I said, "On the basis of our studies he has a very low efficiency rating." Pointing this out. And I said, "If he wants to court martial me, you tell him I'm ready to go into court," but I said, "Just tell him that he'd better be prepared to be..to hear some very critical data that I've got from his own office. I got these data right from his own office. " And I said, "I have some comparisons to make." And I said, "He is..he has the worst record of any Army that we have anywhere, including the Pacific. Where there's even greater difficulty in using personnel



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DR. DeBAKEY: adequately." And I said, "If he wants to be prepared for this, then tell him to come on and court martial me. I'm ready."

So Elliott said, "I think you'd better tell..you'd better come and tell the chief surgeon for the whole theater, whose name escapes me at the moment, but it'll come to me because I know him well. He was made a head of the V.A.--medical director of the V. A. So he took me in to see him and I told him the same thing. He said, "You know, I'd like to have those data because I suspected all along this fellow was doing an inefficient job with his personnel." And he said, "I'd like to have it." And I said, "Sure, I'll give it to you." And he said, "I don't think you need to worry about this court martial. Go on. We'll send you back to the Army you were supposed to go to." That's the last I heard of it.

SCHANKE: That was the end of the court martial.

DR. DeBAKEY: Well, it's not quite the end of the story. Because the end of the story is this. That kind of made me mad. You

DR. DeBAKEY: know. I was a little disturbed by this fellow. And so when I got back home, I got together with Beebe and we prepared an analysis of all the Armies. And we wrote an article and it was published in what was called Health. Now Health was a secret, classified document that went to the Chief, the Commander, the Commander-in-Chief of each Army in each theater. And there was this article. So he saw it. This fellow came up for a promotion and didn't get it. That in a sense wasn't vengeance, it was a kind of a, let's say, reward in reverse that he got for his other thing.

SCHANKE: Did his disorganization get straightened out so that it functioned more efficiently thereafter.

DR. DeBAKEY: Well, you see, well, it was very difficult to say because the war ended. And there wasn't enough to be able to say. Because he never did..He never really was capable of doing the job he was supposed to do. He was so insecure that he compensated to the point of being inefficient.

SCHANKE: Right.

END OF SIDE I (A)